THE STATUS OF THE GRAY FLYCATCHER IN WASHINGTON STATE

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Larrison (1970) reported seeing on 31 May 1970 a bird with the field marks and song of the Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax wrightii*) in a stand of Yellow Pines (*Pinus ponderosa*) in Wenas Park, 17 km north northwest of Naches, Yakima County, Washington. This undocumented sight record was the first report of the species in the state. On 13 June 1972 Terence R. Wahl closely observed a bird with the field marks of the Gray Flycatcher in the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge, near Othello, Adams County, in willows (*Salix*) surrounded by sagebrush (*Artemisia*) (Rogers 1972, T. R. Wahl pers. comm.). Between 26-30 May 1972 Yaich and Larrison (1973) observed and photographed a Gray Flycatcher at Wenas Park in a nest "some 6 feet from the ground at the base of one of the lowermost branches of a small pine tree." The nest contained two eggs. In a note appended to this report, Larrison described finding two more nests and an additional 10 Gray Flycatchers within 6 km of Wenas Park, 23-28 May 1973. These birds were mainly in Yellow Pine groves, though one nest was in willows. Larrison concluded "The species is apparently becoming established in at least this part of the yellow pine belt of the eastern Cascades in Washington."

The discovery Cheryl Lavers and I subsequently made of a small population of Gray Flycatchers with well grown fledglings in Klickitat County, near the southern border of the state, confirms successful nesting in Washington. More importantly, it begins to outline the distribution of the species in the state and suggests its point of origin from Oregon. Our observations are reported here in detail.

On 27 June 1973 near the Klickitat Wildlife Recreation Area headquarters midway on the Goldendale to Glenwood road, Klickitat County, our attention was caught by some strikingly pale pearl gray *Empidonax* flycatchers. An adult bird was feeding two well grown fledglings. The birds were in plain sight and very tame, completely ignoring us while we observed them through 7x35 binoculars from distances of 8 to 13 m. Lighting conditions were ideal. Here is our description, discussed and written up on the spot after 15 or 20 minutes of close study: Head and back, very pale, bright, pearl gray, with no admixture of olive or brown; tail, brownish; underparts white, or perhaps grayish around the breast, with no trace of yellowish; eyering and wingbars well marked and prominent; lower mandible prominently bright orangey flesh color (two or three times we saw black at the tip of the lower mandible, but could not be certain if this was mandible color, or merely an insect carried at the tip of the bill). We both had the impression that these were quite large *Empidonax*. *Behavior:* these birds and others we observed were foraging and singing from ground level to about 4 m up in the lower branches of trees. Unlike many *Empidonaces*, they showed a clear preference for remaining out in the bright sun. If one landed in a shady place, it immediately shifted its position as much as 0.5 m to get back into the sun. When they flipped their tails, unfailingly they first lowered, then raised the tail, a trait of the Gray Flycatcher, the opposite of other *Empidonaces* (Phillips et al. 1964). *Voice*: at the time the non-singing parent bird was feeding the young, three or more flycatchers were singing in the immediate vicinity. I observed one of these from a distance of 8 to 10 m. In plumage it was identical to the first birds observed. It sang constantly, singing one complete song about every five seconds. The song was regular and invariable, with two parts, the second part higher than the first. To me it sounded like choop cheep. To Cheryl's more

discriminating ear, it sounded like ss-pit ss-peet. I listened to the song 40 or more times and the only variation was once when it went choop cheep pit. The range and quality of the voice was somewhat similar to that of a Dusky Flycatcher (*E. oberholseri*) but differed in being divided into discrete, regular two-note units, whereas the Dusky's song (one or two were singing nearby) was more or less continuous, its three or four elements repeated in random sequence. Two or three other birds singing right near the one I was observing were singing an identical song, equally regular and unvaried. The habitat was open Yellow Pine-Garry Oak (*Quercus garryana*)—Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga taxifolia*) association, with a bare understory. There was no sagebrush anywhere in this area of open woodland and oak savannah.

In the experience of Harry B. Nehls (pers. comm.), who has studied the species extensively in Oregon, and in most published accounts of the species (e.g. Hoffmann 1927), the presence of some sagebrush is considered an essential ingredient for breeding habitat. However, the two fledglings we watched being fed in Klickitat County indicate nesting occurred close to where we saw them, in an area with no sagebrush. Wenas Park, where Yaich and Larrison made the majority of their sightings, is in a rather similar area of open woodland in which sagebrush is not prominent, though large tracts of sagebrush begin 2-3 km to the east.

In the summer of 1974, alerted birders began searching for the species in Yellow Pine woodland. Wahl (pers. comm.) investigated the Klickitat County area where I had discovered the birds the previous summer and found it "swarming" with Gray Flycatchers, Eugene Hunn (pers. comm.) checked the Wenas Park area and found it similarly "swarming". Bill Tweit (pers. comm.) found several in a stand of yellow pines about 13 km northeast of Wenas Park. Wahl recorded their song in both Klickitat County and Wenas Park.

On 29 June 1974 a male Gray Flycatcher was collected at Wenas Park (specimen to Burke Museum, University of Washington). In-hand characters of this specimen, compared with typical Dusky and Hammond's (*E. hammondii*) Flycatchers (after the key in Phillips and Lanyon 1970), are the following: lower mandible bi-colored, pale yellow basally, dusky tip (nearly always uniformly colored in the Dusky Flycatcher); primary coverts with edges conspicuously paler than their centers (inconspicuous in Dusky); outer web of outer retrix, as seen from above, definitely whitish (unlike Hammond's); bill, measured from anterior edge of nostril, 9.5 mm (over 8.0 mm in the Gray, almost always 7.5 mm or less in Hammond's); tail 59 mm (56.6 mm or more in Gray, 55.0 or less in Hammond's); wing chord 70 mm, for a wing minus tail difference of 11.0 mm (usually more than 7.0 mm in Gray, less than 8.0 mm in Dusky); 10th primary longer than 4th (almost always the reverse in Dusky); 9th primary longer than 6th (about equal in male Dusky).

DISTRIBUTION IN THE STATE

Nehls (pers. comm.) gives the following as the northern limits of the Gray Flycatcher's range in Oregon: "North to the southern base of the Ochoco Mountains in the area about Post and Paulina, skirting the base of the Blue Mountains and east to perhaps Huntington. The western limits are found at the base of the Cascade Range. A finger of the population runs north along the west side of the Deschutes River into the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, but not beyond. On the east side of the river to Madras."

The small population we located in Klickitat County is in a line about 128 km directly north of this northerly extending "finger." This suggests that this is the area where the species funnels into Washington from Oregon, following up the Deschutes River to where it empties into the Columbia River, and from there

proceeding north in Klickitat County to where we found them. This same line continued north another 110 km reaches the Wenas Creek area of Yaich and Larrison's sightings. The eastern slopes of the Cascades would inhibit extension very far west of this line. Mountainous country above Wenas Creek might impede extension north. But Wahl's 1972 sighting suggests the species might conceivably extend east as far as Othello, Adams County, Washington.

The south central Washington locations where the various sightings of Gray Flycatchers have been made are only a small fraction of an extensive area little explored by birders. Further it is an area in which several species of *Empidonax* abound. *Empidonax* flycatchers are difficult, and in particular many Washington birders are unfamiliar with Gray Flycatchers. Furthermore, some of these birds are evidently nesting outside their expected habitat. Nehls (pers. comm.) speaks of this species occurring in Oregon in dense but often widely separated "colonies." There may be a number of these small "colonies" undetected in Washington. Within the area of Klickitat, Yakima, southern Grant, and southwestern Adams counties, careful search of open pine woodland and of pine groves or willow clumps bordering sagebrush from late May into July will probably show the species to be well established in the state, though occurring in widely separated "colonies."

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